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# ***Fire and Rain, The Tramp and The Trickster:* romance and the family in the early films of Raj Kapoor**

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Ranbir Raj Kapoor (1924-1988) is one of the greatest figures of Hindi cinema. His career of over forty years brought him major fame in India and overseas as star, director and producer. Championed by Nehru, an international star long before talk of global Bollywood, Raj Kapoor and his films were loved across the USSR and the whole of Asia. RK's early films are formative to his own long career and he revisits many of their themes in later years but they are also foundational to the Indian cinema itself. The melodrama, whose origins lie in nineteenth-century European fiction and theatre, follow a well-known path through nineteenth-century theatre into Indian cinema (Vasudevan 2010). RK's films are remembered today for their spectacle of song and dance, his blend of romance, sexuality and spirituality, which created a language for the expression of emotion, set against a backdrop of modern, independent India and its contemporary social concerns. This article looks at the early work of RK in the decade from his directorial debut, *Aag* to his classic *Shree 420*, concentrating on the four films he produced and directed, co-starring one of the greatest stars of the 1950s, Nargis. These are *Aag/Fire*, *Barsaat/Rain*, *Awaara/The Tramp* and *Shree 420/The Trickster*. During this period the pair made 19 films together as they both worked with other directors and producers, separately and together, but these four films form a coherent group that defined RK as a film maker and changed Hindi film forever.

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## Introduction

The 1940s saw upheavals in India as Independence came in 1947 with the Partition of India into India and the two wings of West and East Pakistan, leading to the migration of around 10million people and the deaths of around 1million, along with atrocities which have been documented in history and literature, though much less in film (Sarcar 2009). Raj Kapoor's family, originally Punjabis from Lyallpur, but who had moved to Peshawar in the early twentieth century, lost their homeland in what became Pakistan. The Bombay film industry was radically affected by Partition. Although a few key figures took flight, most famously the singing star Noor Jehan, the industry gained many new personnel who migrated from Lahore, along with the large number of Bengalis who migrated from Calcutta, which remained in India.

Ranbir Raj Kapoor was the oldest son of Prithviraj Kapoor (1906-1972), a star who made the transition from silent to talkies, working in Imperial Studios, Bombay, then with the celebrated New Theatres, Calcutta, before returning to Bombay where the family finally settled (Jain 2005, Sharma 2002). Raj's brothers, Shammi (1931-2011) and Shashi (1938–) later became major stars, while Raj's three sons worked in films, Rishi Kapoor (1952–) becoming a major star in his own right, and Raj's granddaughters Karishma (1974–) and Kareena (1980–) leading stars of

their generation, while his grandson, Ranbir (1982–) is now emerging as a leading hero (see Jain 2005).

The Kapoor dynasty is famous for its work in cinema but it also had close connections with the theatre. Prithviraj was a member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), founded in 1942, which was closely connected to the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). IPTA was linked to the Communist Party, though many of its members were not Communists, but were committed to achieving social change through theatre while also fundraising for famine relief. Prithviraj Kapoor founded Prithvi Theatres in 1944, a bohemian travelling group which ran until 1960 with Prithviraj starring in every production (Kapoor 2004). Its name is now associated with the actual theatre in Bombay, founded by Prithvi's youngest son, Shashi, and his wife Jennifer Kendal Kapoor.

RK began to work with his father in theatre and was well known in artistic circles before he joined the film industry in the 1940s, to train with his father's friend, Kidar Sharma (Sharma 2002). After working as an assistant, RK had his first starring role in Sharma's *Neel Kamal* (1947), paired with Madhubala, one of the great screen goddesses of 1950s Indian cinema. Raj's ambitions were boundless and he decided to make his own film in his early twenties, *Aag*.

## Hindi film in the 1940s

When RK became a director in the 1940s, Hindi films were changing rapidly (Dwyer 2011). The directors from this period created what is now regarded as a Golden Age of Indian cinema. These included Mehboob Khan who made wonderful epics such as *Mother India* (1957), while Guru Dutt made his famous great melodramas, *Pyaasa* (1957) and *Kaagaz ke phool* (1959), Bimal Roy brought a Bengali literariness combined with social concern in his films including *Devdas* (1955). A new style of Indian cinema was evolving in Calcutta, where Satyajit Ray made his first film, *Pather Panchali*, in 1955. Three stars dominated the new generation of actors. Dilip Kumar, also from Peshawar like the Kapoors, had a natural and intense acting style, and was known as the tragedy king; while the stylish Dev Anand, brought up in Lahore, was known as Debonair Dev; the third was Raj Kapoor himself.

There also occurred a sea-change in musical styles between the films of the late 40s and the 50s as playback singing allowed a new type of singing star, including Lata Mangeshkar, who has sung from this period to the present, as well as opening up the spectacle of dance by separating actor and singer.

The Bombay films of this period blend melodrama with realism, foregrounding the emotions, while dealing with the regulation of social relationships to create a framework of

desire, self, family and romance (Dwyer 2000a; among the vast literature on melodrama see Vasudevan 2010).

The films in which Prithviraj had worked were epics, historicals and mythologicals, where grand dialogues were delivered in a theatrical manner. However, by the 1940s, these were falling out of favour or only screened in the B movie circuits. While tragic literary heroes such as Devdas (Dwyer 2004) were still popular, new films were being made about ordinary people, mostly from the middle and lower classes and in particular about the youth who were seeking to find a place in the new India. The younger generation of film-makers was less theatrical, and whilst watching Hollywood alongside Indian films, were developing a more natural style of acting that was suited to this more realistic world, though still working in a melodramatic mode. It was here that RK made his mark.

## Aag

RK's confidence in his maiden venture and his ability to persuade others of his ambition is seen in his success of casting three leading heroines (Kamini Kaushal, Nigar Sultana and Nargis) to star opposite him, at a time when he was known only as Prithviraj's son. Although the film proudly proclaims it is made by RK Productions, the production office was actually based in an old car. The film had not yet established RK's usual team, which he was to work with as long as possible and nor does the

film have his trademarks such as the musical style that he would establish with his second film.

Raj Kapoor sets this film in the context of the theatre, the background in which he grew up, and the source of the melodrama in the Hindi film. The film itself looks very theatrical in many ways, with the acting of the non-protagonists, such as his mother and father, seeming to belong to a different performative tradition, while the younger generation has a more filmic style of acting, emphasised by close-up and expressive angles to allow them to use naturalistic styles. The story is the boy's struggle against his parents' dreams for him but RK's new style of acting and performance highlights their old fashioned nature and places them outside his modern world.

RK plays Kewal, a creative man who wants to express himself in theatre. Even though his parents are patient and kind when he fails his exams, he uses this as the occasion to reveal he has other dreams. The film is structured in three main acts of uneven length, framed by an opening and a conclusion. The opening is Kewal's wedding night, where his bride screams like a horror film heroine on seeing his terribly scarred face. He raises his hand to hit her but instead decides to tell her the story of his life in three acts, of uneven length, saying his downfall was his beauty, women and theatre. Each act is associated with a woman

called Nimmi and a particular play he was trying to produce.

The flashback begins with the first act, childhood, when the young Kewal (Shashi Kapoor) is enchanted by a travelling troupe with a bullock cart. He daydreams in class of the teacher of a theatre in which his teacher is a clown and plans to stage his own version of the Parsi drama, *Bilwamangal*, in which his friend Nimmi, will act as Chintamani. However, when her parents take her away when they leave town, the play is abandoned. Prithviraj had started his career in the Parsi Theatre, the major urban theatrical form of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century (Gupt 2005). (Perhaps it is significant that Kewal is reading in school about Alexander the Great, as Prithviraj had recently starred in Sohrab Modi's *Sikandar*, 1941)

The second act is set in college where Kewal meets a girl called Nirmala whom he hopes is his Nimmi. She is not his first Nimmi but is willing to let him call her by this name. Kewal casts her as Shakuntala in his staging of Kalidasa's classical Sanskrit play. However, Nimmi's parents arrange her marriage and so the play is again abandoned. After failing his exams, Kewal can no longer follow the path his parents had planned for him, so he sets off to try to realise his dreams in the city of Bombay. The third act is set in a theatre in that metropolis, where Kewal is trying to stage a modern play. He finds a

patron in the painter Rajen, with whom they audition various heroines, finding eventually a nameless Partition refugee, who makes his third Nimmi.

The film is set in the India of the 1940s, with the action covering a period of at least ten years, from Kewal's boyhood to manhood, showing the movement in time through the three styles of theatre. However, there is nothing about film itself, and the relationship between film and theatre, which might have formed a fourth act. Act 3 is shot mostly in a modern, western-style theatre, whose exterior is the Opera House Bombay, although it is not clear that the indoor shots match the outdoor. The staging of the songs is entirely filmic and, although there are cuts to a theatre audience, the sequences themselves are not framed by the proscenium arch but consist of a variety of camera angles, distances and cuts with stage shots that are not part of the film but which capture Nargis' beauty.

Although Nargis has the top billing in the film, as the major star among the three women, she plays the only Nimmi who chooses to leave Kewal, abandoning him after he scars his beauty deliberately, after finding out Rajen is in love with her. The three acts each have a different Nimmi, who are all in some way subsumed by his lost childhood sweetheart who becomes his bride. While Kewal gives the two later Nimmis their names, one because he thinks she could be his lost Nimmi and the

third because she has no name, it is not entirely clear what this naming is all about. Could it be the naming of an ideal woman or it could be a way of refusing to accept that he has fallen in love many times? When Kewal abandons his quest for Nimmi, accepting an arranged marriage that leads us to the final conclusion of the play, the sacredness of the name 'Nimmi' is upheld. After hearing Kewal's story, the bride reveals she is the first Nimmi who changed her name to Sudha to preserve his memory, and they agree finally to perform a play together.

Nimmi seems to represent a quest for inner beauty. Although Rajen and Kewal debate the virtues of painting and theatre, Kewal argues that only theatre portrays the real beauty of the soul whose inner beauty is greater than the painted form. At the audition of the female actors, when the two men are considering potential heroines for the play, Kewal tries to explain to Rajen this inner beauty for which he is looking, rather than an external beauty. None of them has the quality he is seeking until he sees the woman (Nargis) who says she has no name, has no home but has come from Hell (narak), which is what the Punjab is, now that it has been consumed by the fires of Partition violence. Yet, when Kewal realizes that even this new Nimmi loves him only for his external beauty, he scars himself by burning himself, thus destroying this beauty. Nimmi leaves him for Rajan, proving his point. (RK returns to this theme of inner and outer beauty most strikingly



in his *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*, 1978, where the husband rejects his wife who has been scarred in a fire, falling in love with her when he is unaware that the woman whose face he cannot see is actually his wife.)

The fire of the title underpins the whole film, carrying a range of symbolic meanings. Fire is the force that clears the old and brings the new, even if it seems to ravage as when it destroys Kewal's beauty. Fire is the first word of the Rig Veda, '*agnim ile purohitam*/ I praise the priest Agni', where Agni (cognate with Latin *ignis*) is the god and the sacrificial fire. *Aag* begins with Prithviraj reciting the Gayatri mantra in a *havan* (fire ceremony), where the fire takes human offerings to the gods. The sacrificial nature of the fire is emphasised throughout the film as well as the fruits of the sacrifice. The fire that rages over the title credits does not have any specific association and may be seen as the fire of passion or destruction.

*Aag*, begun in the colonial period and completed during the realization of Independence and Partition, is one of the first films to refer to the Partition, even indirectly, after which it remains largely unmentioned (Sarcar 2009). Although we do not know how much meaning RK intended to convey with this reading of the fire or how much his contemporary audiences interpreted such references, it seems clear in hindsight that

the nameless character, who could be Hindu or Muslim, is a victim of the Partition.

The first two songs of the film focus on fire and passion, but more a passion for life than for romantic love. The first '*Dekh chand ki aur*/Look at the moon', begins with '*Kahin ka deepak, kahin ka baati...*' and the lamp and the wick remain the dominant image of the first part of the song's picturisation as Kewal is shot in close-up with a lamp's flame, and a small fire burns by the beach hut, although neither the flame nor fire is central to the song's lyrics which mention the traveller looking at the moon and foaming waters.

The second song, the famous '*Zinda hoon is tarah ki gham-e-zindagi nahin, jalta hua diya hoon magar roshni nahin*/I am alive but lifeless, I am a burning lamp that gives no light', which Kewal sings when the second Nimmi is about to be married and she is shot surrounded by celebratory lights. The other songs are mostly songs from the plays and do not carry much romance and emotion as later songs do apart from '*Na aankhon mein aansoo*/There are no tears in my eyes', a song of grief when Nimmi is about to leave Kewal.

Although *Aag* was not a major success, Raj Kapoor was now emerging as a major figure in Indian cinema. He acted in Mehboob Khan's masterpiece, *Andaaz*, 1949 with Nargis and one of the other major figures of Indian cinema, Dilip Kumar. Mehboob Khan, whose rags to riches story was almost as famous as his

films, first introduced Nargis in *Taqdeer*, 1943 and had her star in *Humayun*, 1945, the latter promoting Hindu-Muslim unity in the build-up to Partition. Raj Kapoor is said to have jealously forbidden her to act in any more of Mehboob's films so her return to work with him for her greatest role as *Mother India*, 1957 marked the end of her work with RK.

*Andaaz* presents Nargis as Nina, a woman modern in dress, manner and relationships, defined by her westernised style and behaviour. When her father dies suddenly, she relies on the manager, Dilip (Dilip Kumar) he hired to help her run the company. When he falls in love her she denies it to everyone, not least herself, but it is clear that the feeling is reciprocated. However, her fiancé Rajan (RK) returns and when Dilip declares his love after their marriage, Nina is driven to shoot him to prove her honour. The film ends with Nina in prison, declaring that she understands that western ways will never work in India. Raj Kapoor's style in *Andaaz* is like that of many of his later films, as he is presented as childishly unable to rationalise or control his emotional responses. This is in sharp contrast to Dilip Kumar's soft-spoken and mature approach.

Although RK worked with other major heroines in Indian cinema including in the 1960s, Padmini and Vyjayanthimala, it is his partnership with Nargis over more than ten years which made one of the most loved Hindi

screen couples. Legend claims he had romantic involvements with all his female stars but his relationship with Nargis is always seen as a true love story, despite his marriage and his children. Although Nargis's mother strove to keep them apart, their romance was seen as pure and above censure, (Gandhy and Thomas 1995). It also seems from accounts such as George (1994) that Nargis was not just a passive partner in the relationship but took a creative role in RK's films although willing to appear as the 'simple', unglamorised object of love in *Shree 420*. Yet Nargis' portrayal in RK films was always thought to show their off-screen chemistry, their relationship is always deeply eroticised and intimate, even within the conventions of the Hindi film of the time. Nargis was never held up as an object of an entirely eroticised gaze, however, as RK's later heroines were. The camera lingers on close-ups of her face, her eyes, and despite her strikingly modern physique, no intrusive angles, just the physical proximity and looks between the two.

### ***Barsaat***

*Barsaat* foregrounds a different kind of melodrama from *Aagby* presenting a series of oppositions: a tragic story in parallel with the romance, the innocent countrywomen contrasting with their worldly urban sisters and the views of the two heroes being in opposition to each other.



This contrast between the two male leads is about the nature of love and of sex. Pran (RK) is a serious, melancholy artist looking for love in contrast with the earthy Gopal (Prem Nath) who is just looking for sexual pleasure. Pran is soft-spoken, shot in close-up and at all times the romantic artist. The two men travel from the country to city. Gopal continues his affair with the hillgirl Neela (Nimmi), which leads to her suicide, while Pran falls in love with the boatman's daughter, Reshma (Nargis).

Reshma's family oppose the relationship and when Reshma runs away, she is captured by Bholu (KN Singh) who believes that he owns her as he has saved her. He wants to marry her and Pran, believing she is dead, arrives only in the nick of time to save her.

The two country girls are innocent and vivacious. Neela waits faithfully for her beloved Gopal who sees his relationship with her as inconsequential, highlighted in the song '*Patli kamar hai/Your waist is slender*', where he dances with Ruby (Cuckoo) in a club while Neela sings of her longing for him. Reshma has never been in love and sings a love song happily, '*Mujhe kisi se pyar ho gaya/I've fallen in love with someone*' while he realises that she does not know the meaning of the words she is singing although they are directed to him (and indeed he 'becomes' the camera as she sings directly to it).

Reshma wears huge hooped earrings and the Kashmiri *phirhan* dress with pyjamas and

relatively little make-up. When she is in hospital and about to marry Pran, she has to learn to wear saris and kumkum (vermilion powder) and Neela hopes to buy a sari for the wedding she envisages with Gopal. Neela wears a simpler dress, perhaps meaning she is from a different area or community, while the girl (Bimla) on whom the famous song about her red scarf - '*Hawa mein udta jaye*' - wears a kurta-pyjama and hooped earrings. The Christian girls, Lily and Ruby (Cuckoo) show their legs as they dance and they are presented as sirens, while Reshma and Neela are shot in close-up with strong dramatic lighting which focuses on their beauty rather than their sexual attractiveness.

Pran and Gopal are Hindu, but Reshma, although her name could be Hindu or Muslim, seems to be a Hindu as she uses kinship terms 'Baba' and 'Ma' and her mother invokes Bhagwan, but they are Kashmiri boatmen who are all Muslim. The film does not make any opposition between Hindus and Muslims, even though this is Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, and the film released only two years after the Tribal Raids into Indian Kashmir supported by the Pakistan army. Although the film just talks about 'hills' or 'country' as a meaningless outdoor beyond the city the distinctive appearance of Kashmir - the scenery and the costumes alone - would be known to the contemporary audiences.

Many of the central characters do not appear in the shots of Kashmir. It was also well known that Nargis' mother, Jaddan Bai, well aware of blossoming romance refused to let Nargis travel to Kashmir and so much of the film was shot in Mahabaleshwar, RK does not drop the reference to Kashmir, setting the pattern for its use as a site of romance in later films. However, the location of town in which Pran and Gopal live is less clear. It is somewhere within driving distance so is unlikely to be Bombay but Delhi is 650 miles away, and it seems more likely that it would be Lahore, less than two hundred miles away, though by the time the film was made it was in a different country.

The differences between the hero and heroine are focused on the urban/rural divide. Gopal seduces the hill women for his pleasure and amusement, creating a fear of the urban male in the locals. Pran is the exception to this behaviour as he is a poetic soul who is looking for love. He seems to have been betrayed by women himself, as he refers to the Punjabi epics, Heer-Ranjha and Sohni-Mahiwal, saying women are more Heer than Sohni, that is willing to do what their families want and marry someone else than risk everything for love as Sohni did by trying to cross a raging river with just a clay pot for support. Reshma proves she is a Sohni by escaping her knife-wielding father in a boat and is presumed drowned at one stage in the film).

Reshma calls Pran, *Pardesi Babu* (Mr Outsider). He wears western clothing in public, although kurta-pyjama at home. Pran plays western instruments, the violin and piano, the latter being used to express violent emotions when he is separated from Reshma while the former calls her to his side. Reshma calls the violin a sitar, suggesting she knows nothing about either musical culture, although she responds to the music directly. Music here suggests love and passion as well as a host of social registers including westernization, class and style. There is a clear social inequality between the two which seems to be of little importance to the couple.

Gopal is aware of the social divide and believes he can buy the hill girls for ten rupees, and believes when they return the money that they are in search of more. He is associated with Latin-style music, dancing to *Patli kamar hai* with the Anglo-Indian Ruby (Cuckoo) in the space of the club, a colonial remnant with its ballroom for dancing by men and women together as well as having associations with drinking alcohol.

Unusually for a melodrama, there is very little family involved, with Pran not having any relatives to influence his choices, while Reshma has a barely affectionate blind mother and a father who is prepared to murder his daughter in a so-called 'honour killing' to protect the *izzat*/honour of the poor. It is surprising that Neela is not pregnant when she

commits suicide after being abandoned by Gopal, as this would add the melodrama by making her also the sacred figure of a mother. The film only touches on the sanctity of motherhood and its sacrifices when Pran meets a prostitute who has been forced to sell herself to buy medicine for her baby.

Although *Barsaat* was much more successful than *Aag*, becoming a major hit, it seems that this was not because of its story and its unfolding narrative which were unexceptional but was because of the ‘attractions’ (Dwyer and Patel 2002), notably the appeal of the stars and the music. The pairing of RK and Nargis, now enshrined on the RK studio logo where he holds the violin with one hand while supporting her as she swoons with the other, was a model of young, passionate love. In the film RK can be childish and even nasty to Reshma as he pulls her hair and teases her.

The film has many verbose dialogues about love and its passions, more between Pran and Gopal, than between Pran and Reshma, but these feel very stagey and stilted. Pran talks of the Punjabi epics to Reshma (see above), while Gopal mocks him by quoting the great Urdu poet Ghalib’s famous ‘*Dil-e nadaan/O innocent heart*’. It seems that the film may be so verbose because of the melodrama or it may be that the young film maker was not entirely sure of its ability to convey its message through image and sound. However, it is with

*Barsaat* that Raj Kapoor shows one of his greatest skills, namely that his mastery of the film song, with this film containing some of the best music in history of Hindi film, much fresher than *Aag*, with LM’s singing, light songs, often based on traditional *ragas* including RK’s favourite, Bhairavi.

The song picturisation is also fresh and new and set a style for expression in images of the songs. The songs of the film are all popular, as Shankar-Jaikishan create memorable romantic songs, blending many European waltzes and dances played on violin or piano with Indian ragas and light music. The lyrics mostly by Hasrat Jaipuri, with Shailendra composing ‘*Patli kamar hai*’ and ‘*Barsaat mein*’, while Jalal Malihabadi writes ‘*Mujhe kisi se pyar ho gaya*’. One song which does seem to be somewhat apart from the film is one of the most popular – ‘*Hawa mein udta jaye*’ which is picturised on a minor actress, Bimla, who does not feature elsewhere in the film, and could have been shot on either Neela or Reshma. It is also composed by a different lyricist, Ramesh Shastri. Neela has a number of songs as she dances ‘folk dances’ to give an atmosphere of place as well as songs of unrequited love; Reshma and Pran have many sad songs and the final song about meeting in the rains shows Reshma and Pran as a ‘modern couple’ while Gopal, who now understands love, carries Neela’s body to the pyre which he lights as huge clouds dominate the screen. Lata

Mangeshkar sings for both women for the first time for Raj Kapoor, giving a light touch with her high-pitched and faultless singing.

While some of the films from the 1940s use very little background scoring, *Barsaat* uses it widely including having Pran expressing his emotion through playing music. When Reshma hears Pran's violin, she abandons the bread she is cooking for her mother and runs to throw herself at his feet. Another time, her father is woken up by Pran playing a waltz, but she cannot join him so he plays so passionately that he cuts his fingers. The third time, Reshma sets out in a boat to cross a raging current to reach him, her only safety line being a rope tied to the shore, which her father cuts, preferring death to dishonour.

As *Aag* developed the symbolism of fire, *Barsaat* develops that of rain and of water. The spirituality of water is emphasised with the river representing purity but also love and danger where Reshma sets out into the strong currents on a boat. Reshma is the daughter of a boatman and moves around easily on the water, although she falls in the water the first time she meets Pran. The rains themselves are associated with the erotic in Indian culture, and with love in separation and love in unity as they are time when people do not travel (Dwyer 2000b). Storms symbolise passion in the seduction scene while the fire of the funeral is quenched by the rains.

The huge success of *Barsaat* meant RK Studios could become a reality and RK purchased a plot of land in what was then a distant suburb, Chembur, to build the famous studios and his own version of the work-shed, called 'The Cottage', where he held discussions on film-making over the years. The studio is still in the family's hands but when he began his next film, which was partly shot there, the roof was not even on the studios. It was there that RK established his team with whom he worked on many of his films. RK didn't see himself as an *auteur* but referred to himself as the conductor of an orchestra, in that he picked the musicians, and held it all together, but he did not make his films alone. Some of the others in his team brought in their ideas which were then part of the harmony in his work. His team was an eclectic mixture of people, comprising other Punjabis but also a number of Muslims, among whom Nargis was one of the most important, who presented a blend of views, from communists and atheists to the traditional and devout. Raj Kapoor himself was said to be very conservative in family matters, in particular with regard to women, but the films under discussion here show little of this, and the next two films are both strong social critiques as well as containing some of the most cherished romantic moments in Hindi film history.

### *Awaara*

Raj Kapoor's film *Awaara* is one of the greatest international hit films of all time, popular across all of Asia and remade in many local versions (notably in Turkish: Güreta 2010; Dwyer 2013; Chatterjee 1991, Kabir 2010). Its success is likely to be due to its two tightly interwoven strands of a great romance on the one hand and the challenge to ideas of social mobility on the other. While showing concern for society, the film does not demonstrate any specific political commitment although it may be seen as upholding the values of Nehruvian socialism which was the dominant ethos in newly postcolonial India.

KA Abbas, whose writings included journalism and novels in English and Urdu as well as screenplays, directed and co-wrote (with Bijon Bhattacharya) the only film that IPTA ever produced, *Dharti ke lal*, 1946, which is striking because of its neo-realism and socialist message. He worked on *Awaara*, with VP Sathe, who also had a strong socialist background as did the lyricist Shailendra. This view underlines one of the main stories of the film, namely that poverty and social circumstance can condemn a person for life, and in RK's final homily, he speaks about the suffering that children have to face and how parents have a duty towards them. Other Hindi films of the time also engaged with social issues, notably the work of Bimal Roy, but, even when they form the backbone of the film,

the film still has to be entertaining and have all the attractions of the Hindi film, such as stars, song and dance, as well as the melodrama (Dwyer and Patel 2002). *Awaara*'s great strength is the way it combines these so the film is regarded simultaneously as a romance and as a social drama, without subordinating one to the other. The film presents issues of unemployment, of education, of justice and of prison sentences, but only as problems facing the hero and his immediate concerns.

*Awaara* addresses the lack of social mobility available to the poor and the dispossessed by focusing on the conflict over whether character is formed by one's birth or by one's upbringing. The film sets two characters on either side of the conflict, Judge Raghunath (Prithviraj Kapoor) and his son Raj (RK), who do not know they are related until towards the end of the film when the Judge's ward and Raj's beloved Rita (Nargis) seems to put the whole institution of the family on trial (Hoffheimer 2006), the presiding Judge played by Prithviraj's father, Bhasheshwarnath Kapoor. At the end of the film, as Raj walks away, having been sentenced to three years hard labour, the shot looks more as if Rita is behind bars, perhaps because she is the one being punished, while Raghunath is shown lost and alone. The viewer has no doubt that Raj and Ritu will be reunited but Raghunath's fate is less clear.

*Awara* is generally critical of the family. In *Aag*, RK shows how the young have to leave home in order to realise their dreams, while in *Barsaat*, Reshma's father is willing to let her die rather than sacrifice her honour. In *Awara*, the child seems to be the last thing on the adults' mind as they are bullying and overbearing to him, apart from the all-loving and forgiving maternal figure who loves her son and treats his girlfriend, Rita (Nargis), as her own daughter, while Rita's own mother is dead.

Raghunath marries a widow, Leela (Leela Chitnis), against the norms of the time. The IPTA/Soviet montage song, '*Nayya ter manjdhaar/Your boat is caught in the current*', suggests his earlier radical nature before he became a pillar of the establishment, worried about social opprobrium and status. When Leela is pregnant, she is captured by a bandit who seeks revenge on Raghunath, bringing to mind Ravan's capture of Sita in the *Ramayana*. Raghunath (whose name is one of the names of Ram), on hearing gossip, drives her out of the house as Ram exiled Sita, which is underlined by the song '*Julm sahe bhaari Janak dulari/The beloved daughter of Janak (Sita) had to suffer terribly*' to face an *agnipariksha* ('trial by fire'), again evoking the imagery of fire. However, her love for him never wavers, and finally she is 'rewarded' when, after being knocked down by Raghunath's car, she is blinded and is unrecognisable he visits her in

hospital to ask her forgiveness. Her saintliness is emphasised when Raj mentions her in the final courtroom drama and backing music of a heavenly choir begins.

Rita is a ward of Judge Raghunath, making her seem to share him as a father. The relationship between Rita and the Judge is somewhat uncomfortable as he puts a flower in her hair and gives her a necklace, leading Raj to ask, when Raghunath refuses to let her marry him, if he wants her to marry a judge. The casting of the film heightens the conflict and the issue between the son and the father as the Oedipal drama intensifies when Raj wants to kill the domineering father, from whom he has saved his beloved mother.

In many ways the bandit Jagga (KN Singh) is more of a father to Raj than the Judge is. Motivated by hatred for the Judge who has imprisoned him unfairly, he kidnaps the Judge's wife whom the Judge refuses to live with when he suspects Raj may not be his son. Jagga then seeks to take revenge on the father by way of the son but he ends up taking on a paternal role to Raj, even getting him to join the 'family business' of crime. Jagga, who never touches Raj's mother and keeps an eye on Raj and helps him find a livelihood, is therefore a 'good father' even though he is using Raj to make his point that people are conditioned by their circumstance. Raj lives in fear of both the Judge and Jagga, being unfortunate whether he has two fathers or none



at all. It seems that the family is a source of conflict, strife and breakdown rather than a centre of strength and support. The happy family moments are centred around Leela, before her exile and when Raj finds Rita; the Judge and Rita live in a soulless mansion where Rita's only outlet for her emotions is through singing at her piano.

Raj finds his only support in women, namely his mother and his childhood sweetheart, Rita, whom he loves all his life. His love for her is closely associated with spirituality as seen in the famous dream sequence where RK brings together his aesthetic of beauty, music, dance and art into a spectacular moment. The imagery is mostly Hindu, though also partly Christian, showing heaven and hell.

It begins with Rita in heaven and Raj is in hell, with several songs, expressionist and stylised dance, and ultimately Rita helps Raj to join her in heaven, marking his redemption until Jagga appears with a knife and Raj wakes screaming for his mother.

Although it was in *Shree 420* that RK takes on his tramp's role, the costume he wears for the much loved song '*Awara hoon*/I am a tramp' has given this image greater centrality in this film than it actually has (for a discussion of the word *awaara*, see Chatterjee 1991: 1-12.) It is as the tramp he is seen as an Indian Charlie Chaplin, not only because of the ragged suit but also because of the comedy

mixed with pathos he brought to the character. India was a major market for American films, in particular during the silent period, and Charlie Chaplin continues to be a recognised figure among many film viewers. RK has key sense of Hollywood which he brings to his films. While the '*Awara*' is clearly in part a tribute to Charlie, RK's tramp also carries the sense of someone dressing up in rags of western clothing in the manner of picking up the remnants of the British to turn it into something else. The hat is not Chaplin's hat. Chaplin's outfit as the degraded gentleman is not what RK wears but perhaps leftover colonial clothes in a postcolonial situation. RK styles himself also on Clark Gable in his looks and styling, not least the pencil moustache. RK even starred in *Chori Chori* (dir. Anant Thakur, 1956), a remake of *It Happened One Night* (dir. Frank Capra, 1934).

This raises one of the problems in looking at RK's films, namely the influence of other cinemas on Hindi cinema as we know that Indian film makers were keen watchers of Hollywood and other cinemas. While we do not know which films RK saw in India or on his travels, Jain (2005: 98) mentions RK was struck by Orson Welles's camerawork and tried to use his wide-angle lenses and lighting which he like much more than the low-key theatrical lighting of *Aag* which provided too much of a contrast. Nargis also modeled her look on Hollywood stars, which suited her

sporting physique as she was long-legged and slim and often wore western clothes. Although her haircut may have been modeled on Katherine Hepburn's, and RK and Nargis were regarded as the Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn of Hindi film, RK was said to have teased Nargis about modeling herself on Joan Fontaine, one of the most popular actresses of the early 1940s, and winner of the Best Actress Oscar for Hitchcock's *Suspicion* in 1941.

### ***Shree 420***

Another major international hit, *Shree 420* (the title refers to Section 420 of the Indian Penal Code which deals with fraud and cheating), is the story of an innocent graduate of Allahabad university, Raj (RK) who arrives in Bombay with nothing but his honesty medal. His education is of no use in finding employment so he pawns his 'honesty medal', signaling the end of his innocence. Without a family, he is truly poor. However, his skill with cards is noted by racketeers who draw him into their midst and, caught up in a world of wealth and corruption, he has to choose between good and bad, personified by two women, Maya (Nadira), the glamorous dancing girl and Vidya (Nargis), the schoolteacher.

*Shree 420* again ties together a social drama with a romantic comedy. The social story is concerned with money (Rajadhyaksha 2006). The poor, mostly migrants to the city from the country, have to live on the street due to the

housing crisis and there they sing of their longing for the village to which they know they will never return. They are a mixed group regionally and their bonds are those of a family. Raj, who has no family, soon builds a new family in Bombay. Seth Sonachand Dharmanand, whom Raj calls a '840', that is, a double crook, the villain of the piece takes on an almost paternal role, finding Raj work and training him in his crooked ways. The Kelawali or banana-seller, Gangama, becomes a mother figure to him, while the other pavement-dwellers become his brothers and sisters.

Bombay still has its old elites, with royals mixing with the merchant princes and the new rich in the new public spaces of hotels, drinking and gambling, entertained by dancing girls. Caste seems to become irrelevant for the poor as Raj who tries to become a salesman then takes up low-caste work as a laundryman while Vidya's father is called 'Shastri', a name usually reserved for Brahmins. The two groups are contrasted when the poor celebrate Diwali as a time of newness and in the hope of riches, but the rich worship money which they amass by cheating the poor.

Raj is the only person who can move smoothly between the rich and the poor, partly through his skill in cards, but also in his ability to put on masks to conceal himself and also by dressing in clothes which he borrows from the laundry, *The Jaibharat* (Hail to India). One of

the most famous songs from the film, '*Mera joota hai japani/My shoe is Japanese*' is often considered a nationalist song as he sings that he wears clothes from around the world but his heart is still Indian ('*Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*'), but this maybe an ironic statement, that he is wearing everything foreign because Indian-produced goods are even worse than these cheap imported items.

Alongside the serious social criticism of corruption, gambling and the building lobby, the film is unusual in portraying Raj as a comic figure. At this point in Indian film, the comic was usually a sidekick to the hero in big budget films, or found only in a comedy genre. Raj's endless clowning puzzles Vidya's father, who wonders why Raj will never engage with him directly.

Much of RK's humour derives from silent cinema, in particular his love of clowning. A sequence where Raj sets fire to the laundry involves antics with a fire extinguisher, punctuated by constant doffing of his hat, which are reminiscent of Chaplin's *The Fireman*, 1916, and Laurel and Hardy's *45 minutes from Hollywood*, (dir. Fred Guiol, 1926), figures from whom RK draws on his mix of pathos and humor as well as his Chaplinesque clothing. Even the final chase scene at the end has Raj throwing a bag of money around the room in a classic comic caper. RK also uses verbal humour, playing on words such as *stri* 'woman' and *istri* 'ironing',

to create much confusion. The joke of mistaken identity runs through several scenes as Raj pretends to a policeman that he and Vidya are married when they are having an argument on the beach, and the same policemen meets them again after they have declared their love, also setting state approval on the relationship.

Even some of the songs in the film are comic, such as '*Dil ka haal/The state of my heart*' where RK makes jokes about the way the poor are treated; while '*Ramaiyya vastavaaiyya*' shows the poor people missing their villages and the schoolchildren sing the riddling song '*Ichak dana*', another hugely popular song.

RK ties in the social elements and the comedy seamlessly with the glamour of the film seen in Maya's song, '*Mud mud ke na dekh/Don't look back*'. However, one of the greatest strengths of the film was his presentation of the couple. RK shows the man as the innocent, the *anadi*, who is encouraged by the more knowing woman. Raj can be innocent to the point of being a little simple in the film as he doesn't seem to understand anything. A moment at which all the elements come together is one of Hindi cinema's greatest love songs (and the song about love in union in the film), '*Pyaar hua ikraar hua/We've fallen in love*', where the glamour of rainy Bombay and the star couple RK and Nargis (as well as his children who appear in

their raincoats), is framed by a comic-pathetic sequence where he cannot afford to buy his beloved even a cup of tea from a street stall, where the catchy music orchestrated in a modern style is set to profound lyrics about the dilemma of love.

Although Raj only responds to Vidya, rather than initiating the relationship himself, RK is clearly aware of his own charms as a man in the western costume which he contrasts with his supposed innocence as tramp. Only after he decides to expose the Seth, perhaps symbolically overthrowing his father figure, does he turn into a man. Yet the romance between the two is always shown with real passion. Vidya's dilemma when the two are dressed beautifully in their borrowed finery, as lets him leave although her spirit leaves her body and sings to him to return with the sorrowful – *'O jaanewale mud ke/Turn back before you go'*.

### **Raj Kapoor's legacy**

Nagaraj (2006: 91) notes that, 'Kapoor was an enthusiastic modernist who endorsed revolt of the young against stifling traditions; for him, the best creative space was in the values created by modernity,' showing that he does this through song and dance with which he washes away traditionalists. Kavoori (2004: 34) argues that RK negotiates tradition and modernity through the 'successful' mediation/meditation of the

tradition/modernity dichotomy through its elaboration of a nationalist aesthetic that was simultaneously western and Indian'. Rather, I read RK's relationship to the modern and the western as very mixed if not ambivalent.

RK and the Kapoors were highly westernised in many aspects. The Judge is certainly highly westernised, shown to eat his meals early and punctually, having soup and sitting at a formal dining table while Rita is trained in western music as well as following a professional career as a lawyer. These qualities are not part of their virtues any more than Pran's knowledge of western music is part of his character. Rita wears western clothes or a 'modern' saribut so does Maya, while Vidya wears somewhat frumpy saris apart from her visit to the hotel. Raj wear western clothes (new) to be a gentleman but when he wears discarded western clothes he is a tramp. Western clothes are not signals of depravity, and indeed, Seth Sonachand Dharamanand wears Indian clothes and is the most villainous character in the film.

Perhaps the place where RK takes his stand against tradition, manifesting his dislike of authority and authority figures, is in his depiction of women. He loves them but women have to love him back unquestioningly, in what can seem to be a rather narcissistic depiction.

In *Aag*, Kewal rebels and sets out to make a career in the western-style theatre but comes

home for an arranged marriage; *Barsaat's* Pardesi Babu may be deeply westernised but he loves the Kashmiri boatman's daughter while in *Awara* he is a petty criminal (though from an elite background) who romances a wealthy lawyer. Raj Kapoor's heroines rebel against injustice, for what is right, and are prepared to risk their social standing or family relationships for love.

RK's belief in the purity and sacredness of childhood love is seen in *Aag* and *Awaara*, and love and devotion between couples and between mothers and children, and even fathers in the case of Vidya's father in *Shree 420*. The songs are also deeply romantic and clearly erotic though not in a voyeuristic manner as they were in some of his later films. Perhaps he did not want to show more flesh or he may have been constrained by the threat of the censorboard, but also likely by Nargis as the change in his depictions of women began immediately after her departure from RK Films and the roles for women diminish. For example, Nargis wore a swimsuit in *Awara*, but she does so to show she is modern and the passionate moment on the beach is the close up of her face with her hair blowing in the wind, not one of her body. In the dream sequence she also wears a dress which shows her shoulders but again this not about exposing flesh but looking like a Hollywood image of a goddess. In RK's later films there are falling saris, short skirts, cleavage and semi-nudity, in

particular in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* and *Ram teri Ganga maili*. Times had changed, of course, but RK could use his status to get more past the censors. Perhaps too it was also that the other attractions of the Hindi film just got bigger and the staged spectacle with songs replaced the tender eroticism, and gentle comedy, though the romance remained.

RK's world of love and romance is built on his mastery of visuals, sound, and language to create beauty, eroticism and passion. The couple is shown to be totally in love, which is not unrequited but sexual and close, and they express this in every way through their bodies and their words. '*Dum bhar jo udhar munh phere*' in the boat, is an example of the way RK could do this in a short song, which brings out the characters of the couple and their love for each other. RK also takes this into the music, notably in *Barsaat*, where he uses the violin to express his emotions which Reshma hears, and runs to throw herself at his feet. In the first two films, this sometimes startling expression of emotionality is found less in the dialogues which remain quite stagey but which he develops in the later films, although he continues to use imagery, notably of fire and water, and song more skillfully for building up emotion.

Although RK's cinematographer changes during the making of these films, the use of locations and studio sets for romance and passion is essential to his deployment of

melodrama where characters' interior feelings are seen in the landscape around them, in particular in the use of fire and storms to show passion. RK sometimes appears a little conscious of his physique, perhaps *Awaara* being the only exception where he's much thinner, and, although striking looking, he aims to show himself to be quite ordinary in some way. (It is said that even when he was world famous, he always introduced himself when he came into a room.) However, he is very comfortable filming the beauty of Nargis in a host of situations and in different types of mise-en-scène.

For *Barsaat*, RK hired the assistants of his first music director, Shankar (Singh Raghuvanshi) and Jaikishan (Dayabhai Panchal), who became part of his team, working with his favourite lyricists, Shailendra (Aziz 2003) and Hasrat Jaipuri, while his playback singer was usually Mukesh, although he also used Manna Dey in '*Dil ka haal*' with Lata Mangeshkar singing for Nargis. It would be wonderful to know how the team worked together to produce the wide variety of song situations and meaning, and how they decided on the picturisation. One of the greatest of these is '*Pyaar hua ikraar hua*', sung by Manna Dey and Lata Mangeshkar. On their first date, Raj takes Vidya to a street tea stall, but despite his signals to the vendor, has to pay before they are served, meaning he has to let Vidya pay. They shelter from the rain and sing

that they have fallen in love and are making a bond but the future is uncertain. The song is shot in an almost noir style with the wet urbanscape but it is not alienating and threatening, but is where they will make their future home and family (RK's children walk across the screen), even with only the fragile protection of a scruffy umbrella.

### Concluding remarks

Raj Kapoor sets the style for mainstream Hindi cinema which later becomes Bollywood (Rajadhyaksha 2003 and Vasudevan 2011). He did this through his juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern, while he entwined social criticism with a celebration of wealth. His emotional appeal to the poor and the downtrodden and his giving them not only a voice but letting them sing, was part of his great popularity. RK's legacy is very much alive in contemporary Bollywood. The greatest living filmmaker in Bombay, Yash Chopra, is only eight years junior to RK and has always counted himself one of RK's fans. He says that RK enjoyed his films and that he finds RK one of the most inspiring film makers. Yash Chopra's own fan, Karan Johar, one of the most important of a younger generation of film makers paid tribute to RK in his first film, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, 1998, with a teacher called Miss Braganza after RK's 1973 hit *Bobby*.



The period in which the four films discussed here were made is often regarded as Nehruvian but how much films really followed this ideology or merely paid lip service is unclear. While nationalism is celebrated, and urban migration and unemployment and issues facing the young feature, these are usually subsumed to the depiction of romance and marriage and the changing family. RK himself was someone with an emotional response to politics, where he wanted everything to be fair and nice but he did not actively engage with any social or political programme, unlike his colleagues KA Abbas and others. Rather, RK had a spiritual and mystical love for India, marked by the Ganges and the mountains, and he shared an emotional bond with the people rather than a political nationalism (Dwyer 2009). Yet, Raj Kapoor's films were political in their own way. They made a plea for something which is still important, for the ordinary person to be seen to count, to have a voice, to be heard.

After these films, RK's career saw other highs and many lows. After *Shree 420*, RK

continued to act in films, until 1970 and to direct until his death in 1988, presenting his sons and his brothers as the heroes of his films. He continued to explore many of the themes he did in his earlier movies, but while his later films were often hugely successful these earlier films alone would make him a towering figure in cinema.

Yet, whatever his successes and failures, RK kept on making the films he really believed in, films which addressed issues of the everyday and shaped popular ideas and expressions of love and romance. The blend of all the ingredients of the Hindi film and their musical expression is his legacy, and the way in which love songs have developed over the years owe much to RK and his legacy. 🍿

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## Filmography

*Aag*, 1948

Director: Raj Kapoor,

Story/Screenplay/Dialogue: Inder Raj [Anand], Director of Photography: V.N. Reddy, Music: Ram Gangoli [Ganguli], Lyrics: Behzad Lucknavi, Saraswati Kumar Deepak, Majrooh Sultanpuri. Production Company: R.K. Films Ltd., Cast: Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Kamini Kaushal, Nigar Sultana, Prem Nath, Shashi Kapoor, Running Time: 138' Black and White

*Barsaat*, 1949

Director/Screenplay: Raj Kapoor, Dialogue:

K.A. Abbas, Director of Photography: Jal Mistry, Music: Shankar Jaikishan, Lyrics: Hasrat Jaipuri, Ramesh Shastri, Jalal Malihabadi, Shailendra. Production Company: R.K. Films Ltd., Cast: Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Prem Nath, Nimmi, K.N. Singh, Running Time: 171' Black and White.

*Awaara*, 1951

Director/Screenplay: Raj Kapoor,

Story/Screenplay/Dialogue: Ramanand Sagar, Director of Photography: Radhu Karmakar, Music: Shankar Jaikishan, Lyrics: Hasrat Jaipuri, Shailendra. Production Company: R.K. Films Ltd., Cast: Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Prithviraj Kapoor, Leela Chitnis, Shashi Kapoor, Running Time: 193' Black and White

*Shree 420*, 1955

Director: Raj Kapoor, Story/Co-Screenplay:

K.A. Abbas, Co-Screenplay: V P Sathe, Director of Photography: Radhu Karmakar, Lyrics: Shailendra, Hasrat Jaipuri, Music: Shankar Jaikishan, Selected Cast: Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Lalita Pawar, Nadira,

Production Company: RK Films Ltd.,  
Running Time: 177' Black and White

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